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2. Letting-Out-the-Ku Magic

754 /199/ Ku poisoning is very ancient. Ch'un-ch'iu Tso-chuan /Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals/, first year of Chao: "To put insects in a vessel to get a ku, in order to cause illness." It can be seen that more than 2,000 years ago the business of ku poisoning already was in existence. Cheng Ch'iao of the Sung dynasty in the section "Liu Shu Liao" of his T'ung-chih records the method of making ku, saying: "A hundred insects are put in a vessel and allowed to devour each other. The one left is the ku." It has always been against [67] the law to practice this. The old Criminal Code had an article [683] relating to "the manufacture of ku poison." But it is still secretly practiced today among the Miao. Volume 7 of Kan-[776] chou t'ing-chih states: "Miao women can kill people by ku witchcraft. It is called "letting out the grass kuei." They let them out when they are at odds with someone. If they are let go on the outside of the body, they eat up the five con-[824] stituents of the human frame /muscles, veins, flesh, bones, skin and hair/. When they are let out inside the body, they consume the five inward parts, or organs. The victim suffers [753] either agonizing pain, or becomes listless, or his skin will swell, or he will feel suffocated, all means of bringing him [787] to death. A month before his death the victim sees the soul of the person who set the ku on him coming from behind to give him something, which is called "the hastening medicine." If the sick person cannot be cured within a month he dies. It is said that either a man or a woman can learn this. It is necessary to set up an altar secretly, and to raise a few tiny shrimps in a small earthen jar filled with water. It should be buried in the earth beneath a bed in a dark room, or under a rock in an isolated path in a remote mountain. If this earthen jar is found by someone and burned, then the practitioner of this ku witchcraft will also die. When sending forth the ku one may use one, two, three, or four fingers. The poison from one or two fingers is relatively easy to overcome;

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754 [562] [683] [434] [177] that from three is difficult, and that from four fingers is not easy to overcome. The Miao men dread ku and do not learn its use, but the Miao women secretly practice it. Before the Chia Ch'ing reign period /1796/ when the Miao found a woman practicing ku witchcraft, they killed her. After the Chia Ch'ing, the Miao did not dare to kill these women, and therefore sold them to the Chinese. The Chinese gradually acquired the method, and those who had it capitalized on it to make a profit." Volume 6 of Yung-sui t'ing-chih states: "A genuine ku woman has eyes red like cinnabar, and red, green, blue, and yellow stripes on her stomach, arms, and back, without which she is a fake. A genuine ku woman has not a trace of cobwebs in her home. Every day she must place a basin of water in the main hall, into which she spits out the ku she has collected to drink the water. If she does not do this, she is a fake. A genuine ku woman usually is found in the mountains, where she sends a bamboo pole high up in the clouds which acts like a fighting dragon, or sends a cape up in the sky which dances like a bird. If she can't do this, she is a fake. If a woman can do the above strange things, the worms which will be found in her stomach, opened after she is killed, will be real ku. A person victimized by a genuine ku woman dies within a hundred days. If his sickness lasts a year, then it is not from receiving ku." The annals and books of successive dynasties contain many references to ku poison, but unfortunately they are not clear. The present writers were most anxious to make a thorough investigation of ku when in the Miao area. [123] But as ku is forbidden by the government, the Miao women able to do ku hid their secrets well, and our investigation had no results. The following notes are some material obtained through interrogation.

Ku is called [ʔɔ˧ʔi˧] in the Miao language, and a ku woman is called [mpʻɑ˧ ʂi˧]. Most of the ku women are loved by their husbands, /200/ which is called /tʻio˧ ʂi˧/, meaning seduced by ku." The art of ku is handed down from woman to [428] woman. For instance, if a ku woman has three daughters, one

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754 of them must learn this art. But the secret is not necessarily
[428] handed down to one's own daughter — other girls may also be taught. If a girl is learning sewing or singing from a ku woman, and the latter thinks that she can be taught the art of ku, she inadvertently says to the girl, "You have got it!" This girl will then get sick. In order to get well, she has to learn the art from the woman. The details of the ritual and incantations used in imparting this knowledge could not be found out. The
[778] ku woman maintains a ku altar, hidden in the house or in a
173 mountain cave. It is said that once a certain ku woman main-
754 tained an altar at home. One day after breakfast when all the villagers had gone up the mountain to work, the woman shut her door and heated warm water to bathe the images. Inadvertently, a little boy saw her. The next day when the ku woman went up the mountain to work, the boy imitated her, heating water to wash the images, scalding the ku images to death. One of them bore the soul of the woman. While working on the mountain, the woman suddenly became conscious of what was happening. She went home to change her
754 clothes, then died. The eyes of a ku woman are red. If she does not send out the ku, she gets sick herself, and her face turns yellow. When the ku victimizes a person, the woman is protected from sickness for three years; when it victimizes an ox she is protected for one year; when it victimizes a tree, she
[829] is protected for three months. A pig may be victimized, but
[262] not a dog, and so the ku woman is afraid of dogs and does not eat dog meat. The symptoms of a victim of ku are yellow
[753] complexion, desire for food but inability to eat it, and a swollen stomach. Immediate medical attention can help re-
683 covery. In 1928 there was a case of ku poisoning at Feng-
754 huang, involving a Miao whose two sons died in succession. He suspected that a ku woman in the same village was the cause. The authorities were petitioned to search her house, where there was found hidden an earthen jar containing snakes, tortoises, toads, and so on, as well as cut-out paper images of human forms. The evidence was conclusive, and the ku woman was shot.

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847 Deliberate abortion is unknown.

681 The most common punishment is whipping, which the village chief may also order. It is meted out in connection [622] with lies, slandering, insults, and similar offenses and is ad- [683] ministered with a cowhide whip which is greased and made [689] pliable over a fire before being used. Moreover, whipping is often inflicted in addition to the frequent fines in money or property; it is also used when fines in money are not brought in. In such a case, one stroke is given for each piece of silver.

681 In cases of theft up to the value of ten pieces of silver, 685 the thief must simply return the stolen goods and, for the first such offense which is proved against him, is merely warned. Recidivous thieves, on the other hand, must expect corporal punishment, which is meted out in addition to fines in money or goods. Thus, recidivous thieves of produce, domestic animals, and similar goods may be sentenced to mutilation and to the amputation of the third, fourth, or fifth finger of one hand as well as half of the left ear. These punishments can also be meted out if a person is unable to pay the fine in money to which he was sentenced.

685 If the stolen goods represent a value of from 10 to 100 693 pieces of silver, fifty per cent more has to be paid as a fine, and in addition 20 to 30 pieces of silver has to be paid to the judge for his services. If the value exceeds 100 pieces of silver, the entire estimated cost of the loot, that is, 100 per cent, must be paid as a fine, and, in addition, far greater charges for the judge.

681 Imprisonment is unknown, as is emasculation or outright 567 selling into slavery. This seems to be in contradiction to the legal practice of handing over the children of debtors to the creditor for his disposal in lieu of payment. /250/ If one recalls, however, that among the Meau adoption is very common and that even traders deal in the trade of human beings only from this point of view of the Meau, be it for adoption or marriage, the apparent contradiction disappears.

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683 754 Since the Meau do not believe that black magic is practiced among their tribesmen, there is no punishment for it. Outlawing is likewise unknown.

692 622 634 [689] Offenses against custom are judged by the village chief or the great chief. Crimes, which very rarely occur among the Meau, are judged by the great chief. In such cases the village elders and the village chief appear as examining magistrates.

Dhuraratsadorn (1), too, points out that homicide and

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1. Page 171.

crimes of violence are for the most part unknown within the family community, which he designates erroneously as "clan." He assumes that robbery might occur if it becomes known that a member of the community has received a large sum of money through the sale of opium or the like. The author then continues by saying that this offense had never occurred in the district of San Mahapon with which he is familiar, but characteristically he explains this not on the basis of the morality of the Meau, but by their custom of not carrying any money with them, [454] much less keeping it in their houses, but of carefully hiding it somewhere. I was unable to confirm the custom of "money-hiding" among the Meau, but I did find it among the Lahu; hence I assume that there is some confusion on the part of the author.

682 The punishment for murder in connection with robbery or homicide is execution. It is reported of some Meau tribes in China (2) that buffalo were paid as a fine for homicide. Only

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2. Eberhard, II, p. 252.

685 439 the great chief, however, can give the sentence. The same punishment befalls anyone who commits simple robbery or theft from traveling merchants. The harsh appraisal of this offense goes back to the fact that the traveling merchants, all of them Chinese, bring wares that are important to the Meau, but those areas in which there is danger of robbery and theft would be avoided.